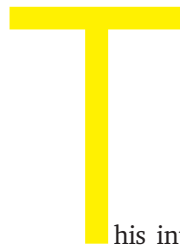


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# Etudes:

A CONVERSATION

MICHAEL KIMMELMAN/ANDRÁS SZÁNTÓ



his interview took place at Symposium restaurant in Manhattan in the spring of 2000, between Michael Kimmelman and András Szántó, deputy director of the National Arts Journalism Program. In addition to being the chief art critic of *The New York Times*, Kimmelman is an accomplished pianist who recently returned to performance after a long hiatus.

SZÁNTÓ: It's customary to talk about the person behind an artwork. But we never get a sense of the person behind a piece of criticism. To readers of *The New York Times*, you're an enigma. I want to get behind that impersonal byline.

You grew up in a political household. Your father was a man of strong Communist convictions. It was a context in which "the system" was often criticized. Now, your job is to criticize, and you're known as a critic who criticizes the art system. How do these mesh?

KIMMELMAN: I've come to the conclusion that I fell into a career as a critic partly in reaction against my father's global view of the world. He was a true

believer who accepted the whole idea of Marxism, and particularly of the Soviet Union. He maintained those beliefs through decades in which it was not only risky to do so, but intellectually almost impossible. It became an act of faith. And that meant you had to simply believe in something even if the particulars of the situation didn't bear out what you believed.

As I got older and came to question his beliefs, and as much as I admired him, I came to feel there was another way of looking at the world. If you just looked at things carefully, piece by piece, you would not have the same kind of overarching global view, but a more sensible if less visionary relationship to the truth.

As a critic, especially as a newspaper critic, that's what I do. It has to do with looking at each piece of art, and each artist's work—and in fact, the entire art world—individually, one by one, and not with my father's encompassing belief system. Maybe that's a weakness, but I think it has allowed me to do my job more precisely, honestly, and it dovetails with our pluralist and rather diffuse moment.

SZÁNTÓ: Is your pluralist strategy a weakness, if judged by the standards of criticism in Clement Greenberg's time, when a critic had to have an overarching theoretical system? Is that still required today?

KIMMELMAN: Well, that's an extremely appealing idea: the critic who will establish a set of standards (in Greenberg's case a set of standards that grew out of a political ideology) that will somehow enliven a movement in art, which then becomes representative of a national or a global movement.

But the art world has fundamentally changed in the last half century. Those critics were fighting for art that was opposed by institutions of power. There wasn't anything like the market system that we now have. In Greenberg's time, critics acted not only as the frontline of defense, but also as the frontline of explaining and advocating, contextualizing against institutional opposition.

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In the intervening years, this system has exactly reversed itself. You now have almost no institutional resistance whatsoever to new art. You have a network of collectors, dealers and curators working with artists, packaging and preparing this work, buying it, before it gets to the critic. The critic now has the responsibility to take the opposite role: to slow down the process, to ironize it, so that the system does not operate without any hindrance whatsoever.

SZÁNTÓ: You are an academically trained art historian. How does that inform your criticism?

KIMMELMAN: I have had to unlearn a lot of what I had been trained to do as an art historian. When I learned—or mislearned—art history, the emphasis was on theory, not on the confrontation with works of art. Art historians are often uncomfortable with the unexplainable and complicated emotional psychic reaction that is the essence of visual art, so I have had to educate myself on how to see.

Artists know this instinctively. They don't worry so much about what they know and what they don't know. They just open their eyes and look. It sounds simple, but it's actually rather hard to do. I've found that walking around in museums with artists, who react in an intelligent but often eccentric way to what they're seeing, has helped a lot.

SZÁNTÓ: A third aspect of your background is music. You are a pianist and a former music critic. Now, in music there is a greater level of objectivity. There's a score. There is such a thing as a note-perfect performance. Audiences can easily tell a virtuoso from an amateur. In visual art these conditions don't really exist. Was there anything you had to unlearn as a musician in order to write art criticism?

KIMMELMAN: There are two things that I find interesting about music in relation to my criticism. One is—and I don't mean to sound corny or self-aggrandizing—but when you put yourself on the line as a performer, in public, with an endeavor that is so deeply connected to your identity, your person, it involves risk. And while I don't like to regard myself as a kindly critic, I think I have a certain degree of empathy for artists who take risks by putting themselves in the line of fire. One small reason I recently took up the piano again is I thought it would be interesting to put myself in a position of being subject to criticism.

The second point is that I've searched for the relationship between musical performance and art largely in vain. I can't get much farther than what you suggested, which is that one of them is a re-creative endeavor and one of them is a creative endeavor.

SZÁNTÓ: Are there any critics who have been models or influences on your work?

KIMMELMAN: Not really. There are critics whose writing I like, as writers: Bob Hughes, Peter Schjeldahl, Dave Hickey, David Sylvester, others. I would say that as I've evolved as a critic, I've been concerned less and less about whether or not I'm right. This used to obsess me.

Good writing is the issue. The idea is to write in an accessible, open, provocative, not-dictatorial way about art as a cultural mirror, and to some extent, as a source of entertainment, as well as pleasure and frustration. Instead of trying to centrally establish standards for the direction of art (which I'm not sure a critic can do anymore), it is not such a bad goal to create a place that people can turn to, to begin to talk about or consider what's going on in art. That's a fairly ambitious undertaking.

SZÁNTÓ: So are standards not really part of the game? If so, how are they part of the game?

KIMMELMAN: A critic is dead and ineffectual once he or she has established positions that are truly unshakable. I don't do my job unless every time I look at something, I'm questioning why I think what I think, and why I thought what I thought before.

The first time I saw the work of Jessica Stockholder I thought the work was ludicrous. She uses lots of junk to make highly colorful installations that, in the beginning, simply looked like junk to me. I wrote some dismissive thing. I saw another piece, I think at the Whitney Biennial, and I thought it was awful again. Then she was in a group show at the Hayward Gallery in London, and I thought there were a couple of interesting things there. The penny began to drop. Finally, when she had a show at Dia, quite an elaborate installation, I got it. I just thought she did something beautiful. I thought it was incumbent upon me in reviewing this show at Dia to say, "Look, this is what I thought; this is how I've changed my mind; and this is where I am now."

In terms of standards, obviously, you want to see something you haven't really seen before, or something you have seen before done in a remarkably good way—and if that sounds pretty straightforward, it's so rare that it's a pretty good standard as a general rule for a critic.

I also don't want to be condescended to or preached to. As I've gotten older, I'm less patient with the work done by young artists that's juvenile stuff about sex. I'm not going to get terribly worked up about it either. Damian Loeb, for instance, is an artist who, by the machinations of the art world, may be fashionable for about two seconds. But I can't even pretend to care about his work. It's too silly.

I hope that if I've established a critical personality, it's that I'm properly skeptical but also open to a fairly wide range of art practices. Some people think my tastes are conservative. Some people think the exact opposite.

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I like Bruce Nauman. I like Matthew Barney. I like Lucien Freud. Chardin's not bad. It's a work-by-work thing. I like Hans Haacke's work, but I don't like all of Hans Haacke's work, and I lambasted his piece in the 2000 Whitney Biennial; I think, rightly. Do I believe that there is a place for certain kinds of political work in the art world? Of course, if it's creative and visually compelling. Does that mean that I believe in all that kind of work as a movement? Of course not.

SZÁNTÓ: Are there hard-and-fast rules about what criticism is okay and what is not okay at *The New York Times*?

KIMMELMAN: I'm responsible for what appears under my own byline. There's a staff of critics at *The Times*, three of whom I've brought in. They're quite independent. I don't edit what they do. If, over a long period of time, there are serious problems (which there are not), I probably would be asked my opinion of them. I have some responsibility for their existence there, and I'm happy to take it. I try to assemble a group of people whose ages and interests are different and whose ability to cover a range of people is fairly good. We can't have too many people who are absolute specialists.

SZÁNTÓ: But are there any axioms that we can state about the norms of criticism at a newspaper like *The Times*?

KIMMELMAN: Yes. I'll sound like the country preacher here, but I don't believe that ad hominem, highly personal criticism—which is often deeply amusing to read—is acceptable, except when the work itself invites some personal criticism. That can happen if the artist makes his or her life and ambition a part of their work, as with Julian Schnabel, for example, or Damien Loeb. When you pose topless in *Vanity Fair*, you're obviously trying to present yourself to the public in a certain way. You lay yourself open.

Criticism can be a little more personal—although still focused on the work—if the work makes strong assumptions about you, the viewer. Barbara Kruger drives me nutty. One reason is that, quite apart from whether I think it's visually original or not (which, for the most part, I don't), it condescends to us as viewers.

SZÁNTÓ: What about your relationship to the art world? Some argue that the only way you can understand art is if you live and breathe the life of art. Others say you should avoid all contact. What are your rules?

KIMMELMAN: You can't hold this job, I've discovered, and be completely apart from the art world. It's impractical. At a place like *The Times*, which exists by the standard old newspaper ethics, the idea is that you have some kind of objective distance from your subject. I accept that. You learn to find ways to make friends and have relationships in that world, which do not compromise your fundamental separation from it.

I don't collect art. I don't hang out very much with artists or critics or curators or dealers. Of course, I have been doing this job for a while, so I have some friends. But I try very hard to make sure I don't get in a position where it is a problem.

I would have given a much harder-line answer years ago, when I had fewer such friends, when I hadn't mellowed a little bit on this subject. But I don't think I really compromised what is the fundamental position of *The Times*: You're not friends with the people you write about, you don't buy their works, you don't have a financial interest, and so forth.

But I'll carry that forward to a general point. If you are in the art world, you can write about something in a way that makes much more sense to the artist or the artist's dealer or the artist's friends. But I'm not sure that kind of writing is better. It's just writing about it the way that group of people, including the maker, would like it to be written about, on terms they regard

as important. But I do not write for the artists I write about. They're only part of an audience.

This gets back to the piano. I don't expect a critic at a piano recital to even notice some of the things that may be bothersome or important to the pianist who is performing. Other pianists may know, because certain passages may be known to be notoriously difficult, or whatever. I would expect the critic to give an overall view of the performance, which, in a way, because it is liberated from those concerns of the performer, is truthful and maybe more faithful to the audience's experience than the player's account.

SZÁNTÓ: But doesn't that go counter to the journalistic interest in the personal goings-on that lie behind all art?

KIMMELMAN: Works of art are precisely works of art because they are unmanageable, unruly, changeable. They have many different possible contexts. One of them may be biographical. One of them may be as an artifact of the economy of the art world. One of them may be in relationship to the history of art. I think all of these are potential avenues with which to deal with this work. And toward what end? Well, partly, self-enlightenment. But as a critic, it is towards a much more specific end: writing something that's interesting to your readers. It's not about being right or wrong. It's not about agreeing with other people. It's about writing something that your readers will find interesting, funny, amusing, literary.

SZÁNTÓ: What is the power of *The New York Times* in art criticism? How does it work, and how does it feel from the inside?

KIMMELMAN: I'm very lucky to be in this job, and I mean lucky. I will say right off the bat that any sensible critic at *The New York Times* understands that it is *The Times* that gives them authority, prestige, respect.

The way criticism works at *The Times* has to do with an institutional authority invested by the readers in the paper. This tends to depersonalize and objectify opinion in *The Times*—which in fact should be read much more specifically as the writings of a person of clear weaknesses and working under constant deadlines. That's one reason I often write in first person.

That said, the power of the institution of criticism varies, of course, from discipline to discipline. It had been most powerful in the theater, with Frank Rich in that job. The closest we come to that now, I suppose, is the restaurant critic, whose review could seriously damage or certainly help a restaurant. Our film critics clearly can't do anything to "Mission Impossible-2," but they probably can help a small independent filmmaker.

The visual art field is different from the others. I can't close shows, but there can be a long-term effect. And there is an effect on the market for artists, which I think about not one iota when I write.

SZÁNTÓ: Apparently, a lot of people are unable to distinguish between news copy and editorial articles. According to some surveys, a lot of people don't know that advertisements are produced by different people than the journalists who write the news articles. How clear, do you think, is the distinction between arts critics and arts reporters?

KIMMELMAN: There is an in-built tension between critics and the newspaper culture. And the latter includes, to a large extent, arts reporters, who tend to come from the general reporting pool. They are interested in cultural things to the extent that those things dovetail with the rest of what they report on: scandal, theft, fraud and so forth. Even at *The Times*, what gets on the front page are stories about the art market, Nazis, and fakes, because they're what interest editors.

Art critics tend to feel those issues are only a small aspect—and to some extent the least enduring, least interesting aspect—of what culture is

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about. We're interested in the art and the artists who make it. So in a newspaper culture there is inherently a tension between what critics do and what reporters do and what editors want.

At many newspapers—not *The Times*, thankfully—there is an antagonism on the part of the editors toward the critics because there is this idea that critics are doing exactly what newspaper writers are not supposed to do—they're expressing their opinion. A lot of critics, at smaller newspapers especially, feel that tension.

SZÁNTÓ: When you're confronted with a story like the controversy over the "Sensation" exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum, who makes the judgment calls? Is it up to the writer? Is there an editorial meeting?

KIMMELMAN: There were different interests at *The Times* pursuing the story simultaneously. Immediately, I wrote several "Critic's Notebooks" about it. It began as a culture department story, but it quickly became a metro story. One of the most aggressive reporters on it was the metro reporter in Brooklyn, so he, David Barstow, began to pursue that separately. And, of course it was also a City Hall story.

*The Times* does allow different people and different places to come at the same story, in order not to have a single voice and because often there are different sides to a story. This was a politics story, it was an arts story, it was a culture story. We were in conflict with one another quite often.

In the end, I wrote my things, and helped David Barstow a little. But if your readers don't know the difference between an advertisement for ladies underwear at Saks Fifth Avenue and an editorial on the editorial page, there's nothing you can do.

SZÁNTÓ: Are there any words or expressions that are taboo for you, either for personal reasons or because of *Times* policy?

KIMMELMAN: We can't use foul language, of course, but even that is changing. I mentioned the other day Sarah Lucas's cigarette in a vagina, although I couldn't quote the catalogue of the show at the Saatchi Gallery in London, which used the word "pussy." That's no loss to humanity or to free speech, I don't think, do you?

SZÁNTÓ: Not much lost in the translation there, I think. But what about other hot-potato topics, for example, cases where gender, sexual orientation or race are part of the discussion?

KIMMELMAN: News organizations are obviously more aware of diversity if their staff represents a wider range of sensitivities, but I can only speak for our art critics. I think, having women, and older, younger and gay and straight men is an advantage, not because we partition coverage to match personal lifestyles, backgrounds and agendas, but just because it makes for a potentially more eclectic perspective. We stay away from pigeonholing, as a matter of fact, because art is out there for everyone and a critic's reaction is by definition subjective, personal, not "correct."

There's societal pressure, let's face it, to be "correct," especially in the art world, and when you read a review that's correct for the sake of being correct—and we write them sometimes, I'm afraid—you can tell; and it's condescending to the reader. But the idea is to be decent and fair and also independent, because that's the only way readers will trust you in the end—if they know you say what you think, not what you're supposed to think. There's no reason that art about race or gender or even art about AIDS should get a free ride, as if it's immune to debate. The difficulty is being honest with yourself.

SZÁNTÓ: What about money? What are the limits of discretion there?

KIMMELMAN: To talk about it? None. Spending the paper's? Let's just say it goes beyond the threshold of a Holiday Inn and stops well short of the threshold of the Gritti in Venice, although one is free to view the Gritti from the modest and pleasant Hotel Giglia across the square, if the work demands it.

SZÁNTÓ: *The Times* is sometimes accused of being too critical. Why is that?

KIMMELMAN: We're too critical. We're not critical enough. *The New York Times* is a Rorschach test. People impute to it all sorts of things that have to do with themselves, their own desires, their needs. This—to psychoanalyze myself—is at the root of my own relationship to it. My father used to read it religiously. He would circle passages in it and note what was on page A23, and why this got placed where it was, and why that sentence was put this way. He was convinced that this was a very concerted ideological mechanism.

106      Actually, it's a large, very human organization with thousands of different individual interests at work, and yes, some predispositions. People read into *The Times* what they wish, because they have invested in it a certain amount of authority. They wish it to reflect their own feelings. I've had many people come up to me and tell me that they agree with what I have written, and then tell me what it is that they think that I have said—which is in fact not what I have said at all.

SZÁNTÓ: What are the most common misunderstandings about what you do?

KIMMELMAN: The most annoying thing to me is the accusation—I hear it less, but still hear it sometimes—that we don't cover enough; that *The Times* in the old days wrote so much about the art world, and not now. This is statistically and in every objective way completely the opposite of the truth. I am proud of the fact that on my watch the art coverage has expanded enormously and we even have the front of a whole section each week. If you count the small reviews, we run maybe 50 reviews a week.

Remember, the New York art world in the old days was small. There were a limited number of galleries, and we reviewed them every time out. In the last 10 or 15 years, the art world has diversified enormously, racially, sexually, geographically, and this has changed the dynamics of our coverage. A lot of galleries can't get reviewed every time. There is triage.

The other misconception is that there's some concerted effort to black-ball galleries or certain artists. Really, what's happening when things get stiffed is that we are trying as best we can to balance lots of different factors—and we make mistakes. We have to eliminate things we would like to review. We're too busy and scatterbrained to carry out vendettas. Nobody figures that prominently in our imagination.

SZÁNTÓ: We're back to where we started. Once there was a time when critics championed art vis-à-vis the establishment. Now, in a way, you *are* the establishment. For artists and critics, the question now is, "How can I get into *The Times*?"

KIMMELMAN: It's funny to think of myself as the establishment. I just consider myself this writer trying to do the best job I can with an open mind. I know that's namby-pambyish, but it's true.

If the job has done anything to me, it's made me more determined not to become a pompous asshole and be impressed by my own importance. That would be the ultimate taboo.





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